Anti-Terrorism Lessons Learned in Reagan Era May Foreshadow Bush Administration's Strategy

The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal A-10
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 16 JAN 89

By JOHN WALCOTT
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration, after eight years of few victories and many fiascos in the war against terrorism, appears to have learned some lessons in its waning days that may foreshadow the anti-terrorism strategy of the Bush administration.

The bombast, blundering, and bureaucratic gridlock that characterized the administration's earlier efforts have been conspicuously absent from its recent handling of the bombing of Pan Am flight 103, the latest armed clash between the U.S. and Libya, and the administration's effort to halt Moamar Gadhafi's effort to begin making chemical weapons.

Instead of threatening retaliation, the administration publicly has treated the Pan Am disaster—the deadliest attack on Americans in Mr. Reagan's tenure—as a law-enforcement issue. It kissed off the latest dogfight with the Libyans as a lamentable miscalculation by two Libyan pilots, not a premeditated attempt by Mr. Gadhafi to kill Americans.

Conclusive Proof

U.S. intelligence analysts assembled conclusive proof that Col. Gadhafi is building a chemical-weapons plant, and when the European allies failed to budge, the administration moved its friends, especially West Germany, to action with public threats to repeat the 1986 American air raid on Libya. "Our pitch to the allies was: 'Stop us before we kill again,' " says one senior administration official, only half in jest. So far, it appears to have worked.

The last acts of the Reagan administration probably are a preview of what's to come. Although President-elect Bush nominally headed the Reagan administration's ill-starred war on terrorism, Mr. Bush and his aides are eager to avoid the mistakes of the past eight years.

Instead of promising retaliation the U.S. may not be able to deliver, the Bush administration is likely to continue to stress law and diplomacy as its weapons of choice against terrorism, while reserving the right to use force against terrorists and the outlaw nations that nurture them. And instead of indulging in amateurish ventures like trading arms to Iran for hostages, Mr. Bush's advisers suggest, the new administration will seek to expand the Central Intelligence Agency's covert efforts to take terrorists into captivity, disrupt their logistics and operations, and turn them against one another.

Initial Efforts

Gone, too, is the fixation with the Soviet Union that colored the Reagan administration's initial efforts to grapple with international terrorism, which former Secretary of State Alexander Haig and the late Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey believed was directed from Moscow.

Mr. Bush's CIA director, William Webster, in an interview last week with USA Today, said he thought the Soviets might share any intelligence they received about who blew up the Pan Am plane. Mr. Webster noted that his view "conflicts with many who have thought that the Soviet Union was monolithically responsible for most of the terrorism around the world, particularly a decade ago."

And although Col. Gadhafi has stepped up his on-again, off-again war with the West, no one shares the late Mr. Casey's and fired National Security Council aide Oliver North's eagerness to kill Col. Gadhafi and make it look like a happy accident. In fact, the Bush administration may abandon Mr. Reagan's often-embarrassing efforts to destabilize the Libyan leader and settle instead for trying to enlist the civilized world in an effort to contain him.

Mr. Reagan preferred to go it alone. He first authorized the CIA to provide "nonlethal" aid to anti-Gadhafi exile groups on June 18, 1981, but the effort has produced little besides one abortive coup attempt and a purge of the Libyan military.

Old Tricks

U.S. officials also vainly hoped that the U.S. attack on Libya—or even psychological warfare—would inspire Mr. Gadhafi's opponents in the Libyan military and elsewhere to rise up and oust him. That hasn't happened, either, and although the administration's critics suspect Mr. Reagan was up to his old tricks again, this month's clash between Libyan and American jets doesn't fit the pattern of past American attempts to provoke Col. Gadhafi into a losing battle.

The mercurial Libyan leader, however, remains a menace. A year ago, Libya was caught shipping more than 150 tons of plastic explosives and other arms to the Provisional Irish Republican Army. Last year, it sponsored a fresh wave of murder by the notorious Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal and apparently hired Japanese and Latin American terrorists to commemorate the second anniversary of the 1986 U.S. air raid on Libya by bombing American gathering places in Italy, Peru, Colombia and Costa Rica.

As usual, Col. Gadhafi has proved to be his own worst enemy: By stage-managing the year-end release of two French children held hostage by Abu Nidal, the Libyan leader only underscored his close ties to the world's most-bloodthirsty terrorist—and one of the leading suspects in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103.

And Col. Gadhafi's past transgressions pale by comparison with his current effort to acquire chemical weapons. A total of 79 people died in the four terrorist attacks that led to the 1986 U.S. air raid on Libya. A single crude chemical weapon could kill 10 times that number, and more.

Nevertheless, this time the Reagan administration has used the threat of another air raid mostly to impress upon its allies the need to stop trafficking in potentially deadly chemicals and technology. As soon as its allies showed signs of cooperating, Washington, instead of crowing, began lowering tensions in the Mediterranean by canceling a scheduled missile-firing exercise off the Libyan coast.

Beginning of Wisdom

Mr. Reagan began his crusade against terrorists eight years ago with a promise of "swift and effective retribution," which had been crafted by an aide who later admitted the vow "just sounded good." By stressing diplomacy in the Libyan case and treating the Pan Am bombing as a crime, not a threat to America's national security, Mr. Reagan's administration finally may have found the beginning of wisdom in dealing with terrorists.

But even if Mr. Bush doesn't repeat his predecessor's mistakes, the war against terrorism will get tougher, and winning it outright will remain impossible.

As the Pan Am bombing suggests, terrorists always seem to be one step ahead of those trying to catch them. The emotional issue of the nine American hostages in Lebanon, which nearly ruined Ronald Reagan, seems no closer to resolution now than it was three years ago, when Mr. Reagan started selling American arms to Iran. After eight years of huffing and puffing from Washington, Col. Gadhafi has moved from invading Chad and murdering Libyan dissidents to trying to make nerve gas.

But if Mr. Bush follows Mr. Reagan's recent example, the new president at least can avoid inflating the importance of terrorists and giving them what they crave most—free publicity.

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